

REMINISCENCES OF AN ARMY NURSE

By MISS SIBBIE WILSON

Midway, Ky.

"The Army Nurse Corps was only an embryo in 1898, when the demand for nurses suddenly became so great, and it has been a plant of slow growth. Even now—seven years later—the flower of its usefulness is still in bud, and the glory of full fruition far in the future. Under the pressure of war nurses were taken from any and all schools, and many were accepted who had never had any training at all. Some were the so-called born nurses without training or experience, who knew absolutely nothing of nursing but claimed to be yellow-fever 'immunes.' At that time the Government, with thousands of fever cases in its hospitals, was thankful for all aid, and the nurses frequently did eighteen to twenty hours' duty out of every twenty-four.

"My first experience was at Jacksonville, Fla., in the latter part of August, 1898. I reached that place about nine A.M. in company with another nurse whom I had met on the train. We went at once to the Chief Surgeon's office to find that he was not in, and from there were directed to General Lee's Headquarters, whither the Chief Surgeon had gone on business. Following him from place to place, we at last overtook him during the afternoon and reported our arrival. I immediately applied for duty in Cuba, adding that if he would not send me I would see the commander of the corps, who came from the same part of the country that I did, so that I felt sure that I would have little difficulty in getting him to gratify my desire. I blush now as I remember this most unmilitary procedure, but the Chief Surgeon was very courteous and promised to put my name down for Cuban service. I have since appreciated his kindness in not mortifying me by telling me what I now so well understand, that all such applications should be made through military channels, of which at that time I knew nothing. My companion and myself were ordered to report to the commanding officer of the Second Division Hospital, and we arrived at those headquarters about five P.M., thoroughly tired out. The commanding officer turned us over to the executive, who took us to the nurses' quarters, a big frame building in the middle of a large sand-lot without shade or a spear of grass. Anything more dreary cannot be imagined, but we were in no mood to be critical, as we were both weary and hungry. The executive officer sent for the chief nurse, who assigned us to our room. This was an enclosure of four bare walls, containing a washstand, small looking-glass, tin washbasin, two iron beds with a wire spring (no mattress), and one army blanket apiece. Between six and seven the next morning

I was shown a tent ward of seventy beds, part of which was used as a surgical ward and which was to be my sphere of usefulness. There had never been a trained nurse in this ward, corps men only having been in charge. These good fellows were sadly overworked, often doing twenty hours' duty daily. They knew nothing about 'lady nurses,' as they called us, and I often wonder if we were all entitled to that name.

"I found everything in a chaotic condition. There were about twenty of the sickest fever cases I ever saw. They had been rushed to the hospital in such numbers that some had had no baths since coming in. Suitable food was hard to get and cleanliness was at a premium. A concoction called broth, some condensed milk, and brandy were given to the patients out of a tin cup. The patients' clothes, blanket rolls, and barrack bags were thrown under the beds. Clean linen was very scarce. Most of the men were on bare cots—often without a sheet. There were no rubber protectives or portable tubs. You can imagine that cleaning up the patients and the ward was not a very easy matter.

"The sickest man was a young soldier from Indiana. He had a temperature of one hundred and five degrees, pulse imperceptible, bed-sores on the whole of the lower part of the back, six big carbuncles on the back, several on the arms and legs, abscesses of glands of the neck on both sides, so swollen that he breathed with difficulty. I began my labors of love with him. It was not thought possible for him to live, but he did, and I have a picture of him in perfect health taken six months later. The other cases were in all the different stages of typhoid. Even nurses did not escape. Twenty-five were down at one time, with no deaths. Of the patients we lost three—one a husky looking German, who lived only five days after admission, and another a little lad of about eighteen, who begged most pitifully for his mother and his sweetheart up to the last. The third was a son of a physician from Illinois. The day the last one died the most terrific windstorm I ever saw swept over the camp. The Morgue, which was only a tent, had the top blown off and left its six gruesome occupants exposed to the elements, there being no other place to take them. Indeed, we were all fearful lest the entire hospital should be blown over.

"At this stage our work was seriously handicapped for want of supplies. The Red Cross helped us very materially; the first hot-water bag, ice-cap, and oil-stoves I had they gave me, also extra thermometers and nightshirts. The liquid diets were much better prepared after we got the oil-stoves, as then we made soups and broths for our sickest patients ourselves. The diets they had been getting were sent from the large mess kitchen every three hours, where the cook was a corps man, who had little knowledge or experience in preparing food for the sick.

"An eminent chef once said that to make good soup was a test of a good cook. So, quite naturally, those made in our hospital kitchen left a good deal to be desired. After the nurses came the conditions were improved. The men on duty in the hospital were only too willing and glad to do the best they knew for the sick, and though some of the nurses sent down were not much of an improvement over the corps men, all worked desperately hard for the common cause. There were no convalescents. As soon as the men were able to sit up, and often long before, they were put on the hospital trains and sent to the large general hospitals at New York, Atlanta, and Fort Thomas, thus making room for the new cases which were sent from all the different regiments. Eventually the number of nurses was gradually increased till we had one hundred and seventy. The regiments were going home to be mustered out, the hospital trains had taken thousands of sick home, and things were just getting systematized and on a good running basis with plenty of supplies when we were ordered to Savannah. Then began the first weeding out of nurses. All were not needed; some left at their own request and others were sent home. Just at this time I went home sick with typhoid. When, later, I was fit for duty again I was ordered to report at Savannah, Ga., and found there that our old commanding officer had gone to Cuba with General Lee, and our old executive officer was now in command of the hospital. I found a beautiful camp hospital about five miles from town: the patients were not desperately sick; supplies were more abundant, and all the conditions were greatly improved; little of interest happened with the exception of an epidemic of cerebro-spinal meningitis, which lasted only a short time, but was very fatal. From it we lost a number of cases. The weather was exceedingly cold and we suffered because of it, as we only had little oil-stoves in our tents. Even under five or six blankets it was impossible to keep warm at night.

"We were all glad when orders came for us to sail for Cuba. Our commanding officer had been trying to get away to Cuba with us for some weeks, so when the summons came we stood not upon the order of our going, but went at once. The order came about nine in the evening, and twelve hours later found us on board and ready to sail. Our party consisted of the commanding officer, five doctors, and forty nurses, and Colonel W. J. Bryan's regiment with all its officers excepting the colonel himself, who had concluded not to go to Cuba, but to stay at home to try to become President! I understand he is still trying!

"We had a pleasant and uneventful trip down, and anchored in the harbor of Havana the morning of the new year, 1899. The beauty of that sunrise is with me yet, nor can words express how the sight of

the sunken Maine affected our patriotic and enthusiastic hearts. It was soon evident that the doctors and nurses were not expected (indeed, I even fear they were not wanted). Our commanding officer started at once to find some place to deposit his white elephant of forty nurses, leaving us in charge of one of the medical officers, who wished an opportunity to air his Spanish. We were not allowed to leave the boat, but hung around till late in the afternoon, when the doctor in charge of the party was ordered to take us down to the Concho Station and thence by the train to Quemados, about eight miles distant, where we arrived without any mishaps—thanks to this one lone man. But at the station our troubles began. At that time an American woman was a *rara avis* in Cuba, which (rather than our personal attractions) may account for our enthusiastic reception by the native urchins. They were the worst lot of beggars I ever saw—seeming to beg from force of habit rather than from necessity. I was wearing a yachting cap, as my hair had been cut short after typhoid. The children evidently became enamored of that cap, and about twenty dirty little beggars (I started to say ragged, but they wore too little apparel to use that word) grabbed me and tried to climb to my head to remove it. The doctor had to knock them off as he would brush flies. We threw them coins and they were easily appeased. There were also some beautiful Spanish women watching us as we came in. When they realized who we were they said in Spanish, 'God bless the American señoritas! I hope they will have yellow fever and die.' It is hardly necessary to explain that the Spaniards had very little use for us at that time.

"We reached Quemados about seven o'clock that evening in a drizzling rain and pitchy darkness, with no one to meet us or to tell us where to go. After sitting around on our dress-suit cases and grips for an hour or more, our major drove up in the only carriage the place afforded and took one of the nurses who was ill, leaving the rest to get to camp as best they could. It was raining hard and we were a bedraggled looking party as we started out. Some of us overtook a wagon with our baggage and two of the doctors. Two of the nurses and myself climbed up on that load and held on for dear life, feeling that anything was better than walking. But even this was too good to last. The night was so dark that one could not see his hand before his face. In an unguarded moment with a sudden plunge the horse went headlong into one of General Weyler's 'trochas.' Luckily, we were not pitched off, but there was nothing left to do but to climb down from our perch and walk the rest of the way. The doctors remained behind to help get the wagon out. When we reached camp we found most of our party already there. We were certainly the most woebegone looking

crowd you can imagine, and soon discovered that, worst of all, we were *personæ non gratae* at that hospital. No courtesies were extended to our commanding officer, and he had no choice but to sleep on the floor. That hurt us more than a discourtesy to ourselves, as he had been most kind and had worked hard for our comfort. Our supper that night consisted of crackers and tea *sans* milk or sugar! Slim diet for forty hungry nurses, but we comforted ourselves that we ought to be soldiers first of all, and these incidents were but the fortunes of war. While we were regaling ourselves with this sumptuous repast the fatigue gang had stretched tents for us and put up cots. They brought us each a big army blanket. This was going to Cuba!—that long so many of us had dreamed of and longed for! Ours were only fly tents without floors, and the water had as unquestioned access to us as if we had been covered by only the sky. Naturally, the ground was soaking wet. We took off our outside clothing and shoes and took them to bed with us, covering ourselves and them with our blanket. It did not take long to soak this though, so we divided the party into two shifts, one set to hold up the umbrellas, while the other slept. This continued for many nights. Our clothing was so damp in the morning that we could scarcely get into it. For several days we had no wash-basin and had to walk a quarter of a mile to an old well to wash. When we got back we always found breakfast ready, which consisted of tea, hard-tack, and beans.

“None of our nurses were put on duty at this hospital, and we hung around for two weeks longing for orders and for work at some other place. We surely were a happy lot the day that Major McDill sent word that he was about ready for us, so we went over at once. The floors to our tents were down and we sat on these and waited until the canvas was spread. And what a good supper the corps men cooked for us that night!—hot biscuits and molasses. The men seemed very glad to have us back and were willing to do anything to make us comfortable. We were there a few months before the regiments started to the United States, and the nurses were sent home as the need for them lessened. We had some typhoid, several tetanus cases resulting from vaccination, yellow fever, and pernicious malaria. Our duty in Cuba was light. We had all the supplies we wanted for the patients, the mess was good, and it would have been difficult to have improved our camp hospital. The first crowd of nurses we sent home were twenty in number, the others were sent to the small regimental hospital until only five of us were left. We remained until the hospital was closed, and when not a patient was left these five came to New York. Our old hospital was a dreary looking sight. The afternoon we left

the tents were pulled down, so there was nothing left but the board floors. We were glad to get away, as it is very depressing to be the last one in a place where we had been such a happy number together.

"My next place of duty was at the United States General Hospital, Presidio, Cal., where there were any number of sick men with all manner of diseases, from smallpox down. The hospital was in fine running order under the able management of Colonel Girard and Captain Kennedy, and was fully equipped with every necessity and luxury. The staff of doctors, nurses, and corps men were now adequate and competent.

"I sailed for the Philippines in October, 1899, as one of a party of eight nurses. We were the only women on the boat, and every courtesy and consideration was shown us. We were assigned to duty on the boat, but the only patient was one soldier sick from eating a quart of mustard pickles. We were ordered by the ship's surgeon to wash out his stomach, and the pickles all came up, but he died twelve hours later. This was the only thing to mar our otherwise delightful trip. When we reached Manila our work really began.

"When the first chief nurse reached the First Reserve Hospital she found the nurses going on duty in low-neck dresses with trains and blue bows in their hair. The hours of work were as each individual nurse chose, and the faithful ones—as it always happens—did more than their duty to even up the work neglected by the ladies of the trains and bows. It did not take Miss McCloud long to change all that. She enforced the wearing of plain white dresses, and weeded out promiscuous guests in quarters. The work was very hard. The nurses were on duty from twelve to fifteen hours a day and never thought of asking for hours or an afternoon off; one nurse in a ward of seventy patients, dysentery, fevers, and gun-shot wounds! For a time there were hospital tents up in all the available space where a tent could be stretched, and still there was not room enough for the cases. They were left on stretchers out on the ground or on the ward floors. The operating-room, dressing-room, and all the ground would be covered with stretchers with the wounded men just brought in from the line, or surgical cases waiting to be operated on or dressed. After the fighting was over and the regiments began to go home it was all greatly improved, consequently the duty was not so hard. But the climate is trying and enervating, and the hospital, an old Spanish one with no modern conveniences, was dirty and full of insects. One can hardly recognize in the present hospital its predecessor of those early days.

"Our General United States Hospital at the Presidio is to-day as nearly perfect in every respect as human effort can make it. It is the

largest Government hospital. It is composed of many buildings. First the administration building, with all its different departments, officers' quarters, dental departments, X-ray room, throat specialist department, and all the necessary administrative offices. On the east of the administration building is the nurses' quarters, on the west the hospital corps' quarters. Then the ward building, with nine wards of forty beds each. The officers' ward of twenty-four beds, our own laundry, ice-plant, electric plant for lighting and furnishing power for machinery and all purposes, and our own new and complete operating-room, which cannot be surpassed by any in beauty and completeness of appointment. The operating pavilion is about thirty-five by thirty-five with marble walls, white tiled floors, skylight, and ceiling studded with electric lights, so that it can be used either day or night. Adjoining are the anæsthetic room, sterilizing room, nurses' office, desks for writing, retiring room, etc., the lavatory for surgeons, with hot and cold shower baths, physicians' offices, recovery-room for patients after operation, dressing-room for cases where pus has not developed, and supplied with all modern surgical instruments.

"The wards are all heated by hot air, with a radiator along the sides of the wall, and ventilators that draw out the foul air under the foot of each bed. Each ward has a bathroom, toilet, linen-room, ward-master's room, and smoking-room, which is used as a dining-room for special and light diets, tea kitchens with steam heaters, separate egg-boiler, and electric stove. The floors are of polished hard wood, the beds high of white enamelled iron. The linen and all the supplies are in abundance and of the best. The food is far superior to that in the usual civil hospital. Each ward has a head nurse and at least one assistant day nurse, one night nurse, one ward master, and a day and night corps man. The corps men are enlisted men. Those doing duty on the ward are instructed by the nurses and are very competent men as a rule and are indispensable. There was a time when there was a great friction among them and the nurses, but that is past—they have learned to appreciate us—we, them. We call this our recruiting station, for here the nurses are sent for trial, but I hope you will pardon me for saying that our nurse corps is composed of one hundred wholly first-class women. They are supplied with everything necessary, as nothing has been spared which could contribute to their efficiency or comfort. (A tennis court and three pianos have been presented to the corps recently.)

"Last but not least is Fort Bayard, our hospital for treatment of tuberculous disease, where some most important and encouraging work is done. It is nine miles from the nearest town, in the mountains of

New Mexico. The altitude is six thousand and forty feet, which is sometimes trying to our nurses. Out of a post of five hundred men I think when I was there there were only four well ones, and these were the medical officers on duty. It is a little world of its own. The officers' quarters, nurses' home, and officers' infirmary are all on the line, then the enlisted men's infirmary up a short hill. Only the very sickest are brought here and are the only ones taken care of by the nurses. These certainly have the best, and everything that money, experience, and science can procure for them. The commanding officer has the care of all those patients at heart and each case has his own personal attention.

"Some of the results are marvellous. One officer was carried in on a stretcher so weak that it was feared he would not live to reach the post. He had nearly constant hemorrhage from the lungs and the sputum was full of tubercle bacilli. He remained eighteen months—was pronounced cured. Has since married and is in the Philippines doing duty. Another case—a soldier—came back from the Philippine Islands weighing ninety-two pounds, temperature 103° in the afternoon, night sweats, and seemed to be in the last stages of pulmonary disease. After six months he weighed one hundred and fifty pounds, had no cough, and is now perfectly well. Many other remarkable recoveries have been noted. The treatment consists of fresh air, sunshine, wholesome food, rest, and the care and attention of the most skilled doctors and nurses in the corps.

"There are several things we as a corps are hoping to be allowed to better our conditions: a law concerning our subsistence, a cumulative leave, increase of pay for length of service, and eligibility of pension. We hope to get all of this in time; our corps is yet young. With time and our faithful friends to work for us in the future, as they have in the past, we hope in a short time to be able to say that 'even the army nurse is satisfied.'

"I have endeavored to show you something of the trials and tribulations of the army nurse. I would not have you think she has no compensations, because these are many. A nurse having once known the joys and fascination of army service is never quite satisfied with any other work.

PRESIDENT.—We will proceed with our programme, but before doing so I would make the announcement that we will try very hard to give you a few minutes' time for the discussion of any of these papers that have been presented, and would ask that you have your questions ready to present in such a concise form that as little time will be taken as possible.